Community Leadership and Land Use: Building Bridges for the Future

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Overview

Leadership is critical in determining the quality of life in Indiana's communities. Indiana is a home-rule state; that is, public decisions are made at the local level, closest to the people. This democratic ideal places great responsibilities on the local leadership. No issues are more challenging than those involving land. Land use issues are complex and controversial because they involve many parties with different interests, the stakes are high, and the consequences for the community's future are significant. Traditional community leadership approaches are not effective in dealing with such situations.

A new leadership paradigm has developed over recent years that is based on inclusiveness, collaborative problem solving, consensus decision-making, and a vision for the future. These are leadership competencies that are learned through education, experience, and training. There are many roles for associations, universities, and state agencies to play in providing technical assistance, education, and training to assist community leaders in developing these new leadership competencies.

Today's Social and Political Environment

Differences in Today's Decision-Making Environment

Community leaders find themselves operating in a vastly different environment than in the past. Several changes that make it difficult for community leaders to act today are worth noting.

Diversity of Populations

The population in most communities today is more diverse. Urban populations have moved out into the countryside, and new Hispanic residents have moved into both urban and rural areas of the state. New populations bring new issues, values, and perspectives to the forefront about what is important in a community.

Cynicism

Citizens are more cynical today, in general, about political processes. Many have dropped out of being involved in public issues because they feel powerless to make a difference or feel the decision has already been made (Chrislip and Larson 1994, Boyte 1989, Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Polarization

Nonetheless, when an issue affects them directly, people want to be at the public decision-making table to ensure that their interests are addressed. Frequently, if they do not have

opportunities to be heard, they organize and arm themselves with experts and legal advice to make sure they get what they want. Because they have not been admitted into the context of the community, they often do so without regard to the community's broader concerns. Their major concern is thus to "win" and make sure the other parties can't implement their solutions. Such approaches invite further polarization in the community and add little to the community's ability to solve complex issues.

Individualism

A prevalent thread of individualism runs through the U.S. culture (Chrislip and Larson 1994). Property rights arguments in Indiana bring this deeply rooted attitude to the forefront. People will argue that "It's my property, and I'll do with it what I want." This attitude, however, doesn't help when community leaders are forced to make choices about issues that affect the entire community.

Attitude About Complexity

Society's attitude about complexity makes leadership difficult in communities (Chrislip and Larson 1994). At a time when people need to be willing to learn and explore, we are still taught in school that we should "know the answers." This is especially challenging for leaders because people look to them to have the answers. In other words, we fail to solve our problems in part because of our inability to acknowledge and work with complexity and ambiguity, and to recognize that we do not "know" the answers. Rather, we need to explore and create new solutions (Chrislip and Larson 1994).

Larger Role of Elected Officials

We live in a representative democracy where we elect representatives to solve our problems for us. Too often, we abdicate our own responsibilities to take ownership of the issues (Heifetz 1994). When citizens become involved, it is often threatening to those in elected offices. There is an underlying attitude that, "You elected us to office. Get out of our way and let us do our job" (Chrislip and Larson 1994). This larger role for elected officials and the limited role for citizens in decision-making have led to failure in addressing difficult issues of shared concern such as land use.

Characteristics of Public Disputes

Land use issues are nearly always controversial in a community. Many "stakeholders," those who are affected by the issue, have different beliefs about what is right and what is wrong, about what is just and what is unjust. The resulting open expression of disagreement is natural and necessary in a free society. Characteristics of public disputes, however, are different than those of family or business disputes (Carpenter and Kennedy 1980). Public controversies have the following characteristics.

Diffusion of Responsibility

Land use issues involve several parties with vested interests in the outcome of a decision. These parties might include plan commission members who have responsibility for carrying out the

policies of the comprehensive plan; developers who are interested in making a financial return on their investment; environmentalists who may be concerned about impacts on natural resources; neighbors concerned with increased traffic; and so forth. While many parties have an interest in the land use issue in the community, there is no one organization with unilateral authority to solve the problem without creating unwanted consequences for other parties. Often, public "gridlock" and an inability to take action result.

Furthermore, just gaining agreement on what the problems are is part of the battle. This situation, common with contemporary issues, is called "a no one in charge society" (Gray 1989, Dukes 1996, Bryson and Crosby 1992). In a "no one in charge society," turf battles ensue, trust declines, cynicism grows, and it becomes more difficult for community leaders to act (Chrislip and Larson 1994).

Varying Levels of Expertise and Understanding
Each party involved in the issue has information from his/her perspective. No one party has all the information needed to resolve the issue. Misinformation abounds.

Different Forms of Power
Power comes in a variety of forms – that derived from financial resources, legal authority, knowledge and skills, number of people, access to decision makers, personal respect, friendships, administrative policies and regulations (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988). Power can be used in constructive ways to find resolution or in destructive ways that escalate the issue.

Lack of Continuing Relationships
As opposed to family or business disputes, where relationships are on-going, public controversies involve parties who come together only around a single issue then terminate. In a community, people may or may not see one another again, so maintaining relationships may not be of utmost importance as it is in family or business situations (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Strongly Held Values
Each party has strong feelings about what he/she feels is important. Often, in land use issues, the stakes are quite high because they involve significant financial resources, power, environmental resources, and other critical interests. Strong emotions often accompany the issue because the stakes are high. Misunderstanding about one another's interests abound (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Unmanaged Public Disputes

Pubic disputes grow in intensity over time. With each turn, the conflict intensifies, the parties become increasingly polarized, and the options for resolution diminish (Carpenter and Kennedy 1988). Community leaders have a choice. If the issue had been anticipated and addressed early on, simple options might have been available. The initial dispute might have even been averted if the public had been involved openly in decision-making early in the process.

Once the conflict is in motion, however, it becomes more difficult to stop it. If left unmanaged, the conflict may escalate to costly litigation and destroy relationships within the community. Frequently, leaders are not aware that they have options, and/or they lack the knowledge and skills to initiate other approaches. Consequently, unmanaged public disputes are the norm (Gray 1989; Carpenter and Kennedy 1988).

Traditional Leadership Approaches to Controversial Issues

Initially, many land use decisions may be made by individuals through private transactions between the buyer and seller of the land. It is the decision of the private property owner, within the constraints of the local zoning ordinance, what he/she chooses do with the land. While any one transaction may have little impact on the community, collectively these individual, private decisions can greatly alter the character of the community and the quality of life for the citizens. This, then, becomes a public issue.

Community leaders have several questions to ask themselves. At what point does a private transaction become a public issue? When and how should community leaders intervene? What are the options? Traditionally, there have been five approaches to resolving controversial community issues.

Ignore the Issue

One way is to ignore the issue and hope that it will go away. This is wishful thinking. Public issues do not usually go away. Another bury-your-head-in-the-sand approach is to hold a public meeting to let people "vent" their frustrations. This well-intentioned approach may actually increase the intensity of the issue and polarize the community.

Do It Yourself

A second approach is the "Do It Yourself" (Carpenter 1990). Community leaders take pride in getting results. When the demand is there to do something, it is quite natural to pull associates together, come up with a reasonable solution, and offer the solution to the community. Often the associates are legal or engineering consultants. This response is effective as long as no other group in the community has another idea about what the problem is or how it should be handled. This also requires a high level of trust among groups. With the complexity and controversy surrounding land use issues and the level of mistrust among parties, this is usually not a successful option.

Stake Out a Position

Community leaders are asked often where they stand on an issue. The third approach is the "Stake Out a Position" (Carpenter 1990). Frequently they take positions prematurely -- before all the issues and all the concerns of the parties are known. Once a position has been taken, it is difficult to retract or even modify it without losing face. Staking out a position promotes

competition among groups and can eventually polarize a community. Energy gets channeled into advocating and defending positions, rather than working with others to find solutions. In regard to land use issues, where there are many parties involved and many different perspectives, this is usually not a wise approach.

Set Up a Committee

A fourth approach leaders might take is to set up a committee. This may or may not be an effective approach, depending upon the intent, who is involved, and the processes that are used. Committees are sometimes formed as a delay tactic in dealing with the real issues. They are often formed with people whom leaders feel most comfortable with rather than with the diversity needed to fully address the issue. Committees often do not seek public input. If they do, it is often late in the process, after a draft plan has been crafted. The results of committee efforts frequently receive limited support from the broader community and, at their worst, generate conflict rather than resolve it.

Consult and Decide

A fifth approach is "Consult and Decide" (Carpenter 1990). This is where the community leaders consult with all major interests before making a decision. They approach the various parties involved in the issue separately, find out the concerns of each group, and seek suggestions for ways to address the issue before making a decision about how to proceed. Initially, people are pleased to be consulted, and the leaders are satisfied that useful information has been gathered and that with it an even better decision can be made.

Much to the leaders' surprise, however, the solution will likely be rejected by everyone -- not because the solution is inherently unreasonable, but because people did not have the benefit of hearing what other groups needed and did not participate directly in developing the solution. As a consequence, the decision that thoughtfully blends the suggestions of all interests is viewed by all sides as inadequate. People do not understand why the solution does not reflect more of their own ideas.

A New Community Leadership Paradigm

Dukes (1996) points out that much of public life today is about conflict and its resolution. Community leadership, in the new paradigm, is thus about the ability to reconcile competing public interests in order to meet the needs of a broader community. It involves bringing divergent interests who have a stake in the decision together to find common ground. "It involves finding forums and processes where individuals and organizations can be forceful advocates without being adversarial, where public officials can make effective decisions without being dictatorial, and where community can come together rather than split apart when faced with tough problems and divisive conflicts" (Dukes 1996, p. 9). These tasks and processes are different than those practiced in traditional leadership approaches.

What's different about the new leadership paradigm? It involves a new way of thinking and acting. One major change is the shift from the focus on just a few elite people who make decisions for the community to a focus on leadership as a process of moving a community forward in its action. Leadership today is not viewed as a few "great people," rather as a community of leaders at every level and in every segment of the community (Mathews and McAfee, no date).

Barbara Crosby defines public leadership as "the inspiration and mobilization of others to undertake collective action in pursuit of the common good" (Bryson and Crosby 1992, p.31). The new paradigm for leadership is based on the following concepts (David Mathews 1994).

Responsibility

Citizens and leaders take responsibility for their own community issues. By claiming responsibility, people develop a sense that they are the solution rather than bystanders or victims. They believe they can make a difference.

Capacity

Leaders have the responsibility of building upon the assets of the community. The new leadership paradigm values people as the greatest asset in an organization or community. Thus, capacity is about building leadership from within the community.

Power

In traditional leadership approaches, power was seen as one-way and zero sum – that there was only so much power and it flows one way. Power was seen as the amount of financial resources, legal authority, and control over people and institutions. Power flowed from those who have it to those who don't. It was something used on people.

In the new leadership paradigm, power is seen very differently. It is regarded as infinite, not scarce, and it can be created. People can grow without anyone losing their power. In fact, public power tends to increase as it is used. One idea can generate another, one commitment can inspire another, one relationship can lead to another. When people join together to work on a public issue, they generate new power through their knowledge, creativity, and problem solving.

Relationships

Working relationships in a community are essential. This is not a matter of "good" relationships in terms of familiarity or pleasant associations. Rather, it is the ability to work together to problem solve – even when people don't necessarily like each other. In the new leadership paradigm, relationships are critical, citizen-to-citizen and citizens-to-government. Three points made by Mathews (1994) are particularly relevant to land use issues.

- Citizens and government officials working together is not only pragmatic, but essential to finding acceptable solutions to land use issues.
- Shifting from identifying "the enemy" to building collaborative ties is necessary and is based not on "liking" others, but on respecting the interests of the other parties.
- Joining diverse groups of citizens in public relationships requires an openness to divergent views and ways of acting together that may be new relationships and practices.

Political Will and Interests

Citizens' willingness and commitment to work on a public issue are essential. The role of community leadership is to help people see the connections and the interests within the community. Community leaders need to create opportunities to develop a community vision and engage in a strategic planning process that link people's needs around common goals. Citizens need to see that their self-interests are tied directly to land use decisions. It is the job of community leaders to create public will by linking together the motivations and interests that already exist in the community.

Collaborative, Consensus-Building Approach

The collaborative, consensus-building approach articulated by Bryson and Crosby (1992), Carpenter and Kennedy (1988), Chrislip and Larson (1994), and Gray (1989) is a way for leaders and citizens to work together that has been shown to be effective in dealing with tough public issues. Collaboration, as defined by Gray (1989, p.5), "is a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible."

Collaboration is not an easy approach. It is messy and requires a significant amount of time in the beginning. It also requires knowledge and skills to be able to implement the process effectively. However, when agreements are reached, they are more likely to be supported and sustained in the long run. Through this process, communication and relationships within the community are enhanced. The outcome can be a creative solution that meets the interests of the parties involved, leaving the community stronger than before the controversy arose. Using this approach, people are brought together to find a mutually agreeable solution instead of merely deciding who "wins."

The collaborative problem-solving approach is a proactive way of addressing issues while there is still time to resolve them. It is best used when:

- Issues are complex,
- Many parties are affected,
- No single agency or organization has complete jurisdiction over the issue, and
- Parties are willing to participate.

On the other hand, this approach will not work well if:

- Parties are not willing to explore alternative solutions together,

- The community faces an emergency and fast action is required,
- The conflict is so escalated that people have already chosen up sides and are not willing to come face-to-face with others,
- The issue is not a public one,
- The level of concern about the issue is not great enough to engage people in the process, and
- The issue is about personal rights or regulations that need legal clarification and/or judgment. (Such issues are better resolved in the court system.)

Collaborative Problem-Solving Principles

Several general principles underlie the collaborative problem-solving approach.

Commitment to Inclusiveness
In all controversial issues, different points of view and interests exist. The first step in the collaborative problem-solving approach is identifying major stakeholders and their interests. When people with diverse viewpoints on the community are brought together, it encourages discussions that can lead to new understandings and solutions. However, participants must be open to others' perspectives and value the contributions of different views.

Keeping Communication Open
Understanding each other is vitally important to finding solutions to a problem. People gain understanding through sharing information and dialogue, both of which require good listening skills and a willingness to be open to other people and ideas. People are kept informed, and information is shared freely.

Demanding Mutual Respect for All
Everyone has some element of validity in his/her perspective on an issue. It is vitally important that people recognize that it is alright to disagree and that they seek to understand others' perspectives. Name calling, not paying attention, leaving meetings early, and other ways of belittling another's perspective or the group process is not helpful. Participants must keep the focus of their discussion on the issue, not on other people.

Understanding Interests, Not Stating Positions
Moving discussions beyond what people want (their position) to why they want it (their interest) is crucial in attempting to find solutions acceptable to all participants involved in a conflict. This is a difficult part of the process, because people come into the process with their solutions to the issue. It is important, however, that multiple options are identified and evaluated through the discussions.

Finding Shared Interests
Participants' shared interests or compatible goals can provide the basis for mutual learning and collaborative problem solving. Participants must accept responsibility for making the process

work. It is important that they educate one another about their interests. Through this learning process, a common sense of purpose and a definition of the problem can be developed.

Working for Consensus

Mutually acceptable solutions are worth seeking. When everyone involved in the conflict agrees on the solution, implementing and sustaining that solution will be much easier and more effective. Consensus can be developed in even the most difficult conflicts by first seeking common interest across peoples' different viewpoints and then building the solution upon those commonalities. Consensus is not the same as unanimity (everyone's first choice) or compromise (everyone gives in). Consensus means that everyone's views have been heard and understood, and that the decision reached is the best that could be made at the time. While not everyone will be equally enthusiastic about the decision, all do accept it and will not block or impede its implementation.

Five Stages of the Approach

The collaborative problem-solving approach involves five major stages.

- **Getting started.** It is decided which individuals and groups need to be involved in the process, what the ground rules will be, and what other important background details will be necessary for problem solving to occur.
- **Clarifying the problem.** People work together to come to a common understanding of the problem, articulate their interests, and share information.
- **Analyzing alternatives.** Possible alternative solutions are generated and analyzed.
- **Reaching agreement.** Agreement is sought, and a written document is produced.
- **Implementing solutions.** The negotiated agreement is adopted, implemented, evaluated, and possibly renegotiated if it is not working as expected.

Getting Started

- **Take the First Step.** Someone has to raise the possibility of initiating such a process. This is the role leadership should play. A respected neutral individual could initiate the process. Another approach, especially if the issue is highly controversial, is a planning committee composed of representatives from the key interest groups.

  The first step involves framing the issue in a way that does not cause people to take sides. For instance, if the issue is about farmland protection, a seemingly easy way of posing the issue is to ask, "Does the community want farmland protection?" But this causes people to respond "yes" or "no" and does not leave any opportunity for discussion or consideration of other alternatives. A better way to frame the issue is "How can *we* foster economic growth *and* protect farmland?" This provides a spirit of working together and places the issue in a problem-solving framework.

  The planning committee or individual initiating the process should also consider whether or not to hire an experienced facilitator to assist the group in keeping its focus; to ensure a fair, honest, and open process; and to move the group toward resolution. Facilitators

knowledgeable in the land use area are available through Purdue Extension and other organizations.

- **Involve All the Stakeholders.** If the solution is to be acceptable to all, it is important that key stakeholders (those who will make the decision, be affected by the decision, or could block/impede implementation) be involved from the start. This includes encouraging participation from those whose stake might not be readily apparent at first glance, and especially those deemed as "the enemy".

  In order to bring people into the process, the planning committee or individual(s) initiating the process should meet face-to-face with the key stakeholders to explain the process and why their involvement is important. Letters can help in confirming meeting time and place, but they cannot build trust. Trust is built on a one-on-one basis and must be built at the very outset of the process. If the number of stakeholders identified is over 25, the planning committee or initiator should consider ways in which groups might be clustered together with one representative and – equally important – consider various points in the process when the broader stakeholder group can be brought together, such as at a community forum to share information and gain input.

- **Establish Ground Rules and Set Agenda.** Before people start to work on solutions (which is what most people will want to do), they should first agree upon ground rules. Ground rules are the operating rules that determine how the process is conducted. They might include *procedural* rules, such as how the decisions will be made, the role of observers, or the process for adding new members. *Substantive* ground rules spell out what substantive topics will and will not be addressed by the group. For instance, the group will consider only ordinances for confined feeding operations. *Behavioral* rules make explicit how individuals are expected to interact with each other, such as people will be treated with respect, no foul language or name-calling.

  The group also needs to agree on expected outcomes and how they will be used. For instance, if a collaborative group is formed by the county commissioners to draft an ordinance for confined feeding operations, the group needs to understand that it is only advisory and that final authority rests with the commissioners.

  The group should establish a general agenda and time line for completion of the effort. It is important to recognize that a collaborative effort will take more time - time to plan, to convene, to gather and assess information, and to develop and select options. The group should be realistic in establishing the time line and should not rush the process.

  These procedural agreements lay the groundwork for achieving fairness for all parties. The key at this stage is to build a level of trust that people will be heard; that the process is fair, honest, and open; and that people will not be hurt in the process. If the emotional level is high, the group may want to write the ground rules on large sheets of paper and post them at each meeting to stay on track. It is important that the group develops these

ground rules and have ownership of them. It then becomes easier to deal with difficult group members.

Clarifying the Problem

- **Define the Problem.** How the problem is defined often affects the number and type of solutions. It is important at this stage to clarify the problem from each participant's point of view and to legitimize all perceptions, understanding that each definition of the problem could be correct and that each definition of the problem might yield different possible solutions. Having good listening skills and leaving enough time for everyone to be heard are essential. If even one of the participants believes that his or her point of view is not being treated as legitimate, the process is likely to break down.

- **Find the Facts Together.** People must agree on what technical background information is pertinent to the dispute, what is known and not known about the technical issues, and on the methods to be used for generating answers to relevant technical questions. It is important to identify what is known about why the problem exists and how different people or groups of people are affected. This step often involves the participants completing the following tasks: determining what information they have regarding the issue; identifying the portion of the information that is accepted as accurate by all the participants; and determining what additional information, if any, they need to negotiate effectively.

Analyzing Alternatives

- **Develop Criteria.** To invent options for mutual gain, the participants must clearly state their interests to each other. Rather than asserting positions, (i.e., what they want as a solution), people seeking a resolution to the conflict need to be able to discuss their interests (i.e., the reasons, needs, concerns, values, and motivations underlying their positions). Finding solutions that satisfy one another's interests should be the common goal of the group's conflict resolution efforts. All should consent to use the agreed-upon interests as performance criteria when developing and judging alternative solutions.

- **Generate Alternatives.** After the fact-finding has been done and everyone's interests have seen stated, participants can agree to a period of "inventing without deciding." Brainstorming can be used to produce as many ideas as possible for solving the problem. It is important that all participants be able to suggest ideas and solutions. During this stage, all must agree that they will not judge ideas or hold someone to any of the options. The group should encourage creativity, not commitment, at this time.

- **Evaluate Alternatives and Create a Resolution.** Once the group feels they have invented enough options, they must decide which ones to include in a proposed resolution. To do this, they might develop joint criteria for ranking the ideas, make trades across different issues, and/or combine different options to form packages of resolutions. The key is that the major interests have been satisfied.

Reaching Agreement

- **Seek Agreement and Bind Parties to Their Agreements.** An important part of creating resolution is finding agreement and then developing provisions to ensure that the participants will honor the terms of that agreement. Every participant must be assured that the others will carry out their parts. Participants must discuss and agree upon methods for making such assurances tangible.

- **Produce a Written Agreement.** The group should document areas of agreement to ensure a common understanding of their accord and to make certain that the terms can be remembered and communicated effectively. This step is crucial, because it ensures that the participants will not leave the negotiations with different interpretations of the agreement.

- **Ratify the Agreement.** The participants involved in the negotiations must get support for the agreement from the groups that have a role to play in carrying out the agreement. They should have identified these groups at the outset of the process and involved them directly or through adequate representation during the previous steps.

Implementing Solutions

- **Implement the Solution.** Individuals and groups must implement the solution that was decided on and outlined in the written agreement. If the people responsible for carrying out the solution were involved, or at least kept informed throughout the process, implementation of the solution will be much easier.

- **Monitor the Implementation.** The group must determine how they will keep track of the success of their solution. They must agree to standards for measuring compliance and a schedule for carrying out the monitoring process. They should charge subcommittees with responsibility for monitoring and calling the participants back together if troubleshooting becomes necessary.

Additional Keys to Success

Maintain Contact with Constituency Groups and the Public

It is important to keep constituency groups and the general public informed throughout the process. If there is no or little communication between the group and others in the community until the group comes forward with recommendations or a resolution, there is a higher probability that they will be rejected. It is best to be open about what is being discussed, seek input along the way, and deal directly with problems as they arise.

Work with the Media

In working on public issues and maintaining contact with the public, it is critical to work with the media. They are an important communication channel in the community and can be a key to the working group's success. It is their responsibility to give a balanced report on issues as they affect the community. Giving them the information they need to understand the issue and its

implications and describing, for example, how other communities have resolved it are means of reaching all the people who read the paper, listen to the radio, and watch TV – and ways to ultimately gain their support.

Conclusion

Dealing with controversial public issues is hard work and requires a higher level of knowledge and skills than traditional approaches. Community leaders can learn collaborative problem-solving skills, and their effort will be repaid. The more community leaders practice and model collaborative problem-solving and consensus-building skills, the more community residents will learn to resolve their issues in constructive ways. There is a role for state agencies, associations, and universities to play in providing opportunities for communities to learn these skills.

William Jennings Bryan enunciated some time ago: "Destiny is not a matter of chance – it is a matter of choice." Mathews (1994, p. 151) relates this famous quote to communities, "Communities are what they are because of the choices they have already made; they will be what they will be because of the choices they will make in the future."

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